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SUBJECT: TRADITIONAL SLAVONIAN REGION GEARS UP FOR NOVEMBER  
ELECTIONS

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - PLEASE HANDLE ACCORDINGLY

11. (SBU) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: With momentum building toward national elections expected in November, center-left parties in Slavonia, the traditional rural heartland of continental Croatia, seem less active and enthusiastic than those on the right. This could be the result of savvy public relations efforts by the right-wing Croatian Party of Rights (HSP), which recently hired an Israeli PR consultant.

12. (SBU) Although Slavonia, long a bastion of rural conservatives, certainly does not represent Croatia as a whole, the HSP hopes to gain enough votes to become an indispensable element in any future coalition led by the center-right Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). In addition to activism and enthusiasm, the HSP has no past record of "poor government" simply because it has never been in a position to govern at the state level. Disenchanted voters may turn to them for this reason, or simply choose to stay at home. All major parties are still strategizing about the best ways to approach the upcoming election season. This is the first of a series of election-related reports. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT

13. (U) Embassy Zagreb political officer and senior FSN recently traveled to Slavonski Brod and Osijek, the major cities of Slavonia, often viewed as the traditional heartland of rural Eastern Croatia. Each city is the center of one of Croatia's ten electoral districts; fourteen members of parliament will be elected from each of the ten districts, in addition to representatives of ethnic minorities and Croatian "Diaspora," who are elected in two separate districts.

SLAVONSKI BROD: AS MARCH DOES WILL NOVEMBER VOTE

14. (U) Slavonski Brod, center of electoral District Five and sixth-biggest town in Croatia, has just experienced the dissolution of its local governing coalition composed of the right-wing Croatian Party of Rights (HSP), center-right Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and the Croatian Social-Liberal Party (HSLs). An internal power struggle between HSP and HDZ officials has forced early local elections in March. Interlocutors in the city characterized the upcoming vote in Slavonski Brod as the best way to feel the pulse of the Slavonian electorate prior to the parliamentary elections expected in November.

15. (U) The HDZ built its campaign optimism on its own results in a number of local elections held in the previous weeks in other parts of the country. The HDZ had done well in numerous local communities throughout the region, except at the elections for city boroughs in Osijek (see reference below). The HSP boasted to Embassy officials as well, claiming a constant rise, both regionally and nationwide. This formerly extreme right party is expecting good results, especially in the center-eastern parts of District Five, including the towns of Slavonski Brod and Vukovar. After contracting a Tel Aviv-based public relations firm, local HSP interlocutors stressed to Embassy visitors that they are seeking a younger, more educated electorate as a new base for their party.

¶6. (SBU) Croatian Bock (HB) is a party of little significance in any other part of the country except Slavonski Brod. It is a nationalist party of former HDZ members, closer in its politics to the HSP than to its past associates. HB's influence in Slavonski Brod primarily revolves around its leader there, Jozo Meter, a former mayor and county prefect. While Meter hopes that good results at local elections in March would lead to his eventual election into Parliament later this year, his opponents doubt the HB has much to offer without a strong presence in the rest of the country. The HB is aware of that weakness, and has therefore initiated the process of gathering a dozen or more miniscule right-wing parties that are expected to unite in the spring.

¶7. (SBU) On the left, the Social-Democratic Party (SDP) and its allies Croatian People's Party (HNS) and Croatian Peasants Party (HSS) won the biggest number of votes on a joint slate in May 2005. (It is worth noting a political defector from HSS had at the time helped the HSP, HDZ and HSLs to form a majority and rule the city.) One would conclude that the failure of that coalition would help the original winners at the local elections in March. However, the local SDP chief in Slavonski Brod Zeljko Racki was not so certain. "People here vote as sports fans, not as voters," he said, pessimistically, explaining it is still relatively easy to recount stories from the war and scare people with "threats" from the other side of the Sava river (i.e. the neighboring Serb Republic in Bosnia).

¶8. (SBU) The local SDP chief stressed that part of the reason for SDP's perceived failure in Slavonski Brod lies in the failure of the central SDP to articulate clear messages that would relate to the people and to their day-to-day problems. Particularly, he said, this is the case in a town and region that are lagging behind the rest of country in investment and economic growth. Although disheartened, Racki was still hopeful that his party could get a plurality of

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votes and then try to find partners to form a government.

OSIJEK: URBAN AND LIBERAL TURNED POPULIST AND PAROCHIAL

¶9. (SBU) The mood in Osijek - the "capital" of Slavonia and the fourth biggest city in the country - still has a taint of the emergency circumstances surrounding the war-crimes case against Branimir Glavas, the leader of the regional Croatian Democratic Congress of Slavonia and Baranja (HDSSB). Since he broke away from the HDZ almost two years ago, Glavas has managed to direct all blame for the poor socio-economic situation to his former party leadership (HDZ) in Zagreb, despite the fact he was once considered the single most powerful man in most of Slavonia. Glavas has also marketed himself as a "martyr" persecuted by an "evil government" in his righteous cause of defending the regional pride of Slavonia, a region that has long since felt neglected by Zagreb, said Drago Hedl, award winning Osijek-based reporter for Feral Tribune.

¶10. (SBU) Biljana Borzan, a young medical doctor and SDP chief in the city, explained to Embassy reps that Glavas won the first battle by getting out of Zagreb's jail and being transferred back to his regional power-base (see septels). Even some people from her own party fell for Glavas's propaganda and felt sorry for the way the government "did him wrong," she said. She was saddened to see her city that had for fifteen years been run by a liberal mayor go to the hands of those who have no program other than fueling people's anger at Zagreb. Although the SDP is not traditionally strong in Osijek, Borzan hopes that its chances will improve with the assignment of Zoran Milanovic, a "young lion" from party HQ in Zagreb, as campaign coordinator for District Four. Other opposition parties in the city and the district would be happy even to make the necessary five percent threshold to win representation in the Sabor. As for the HDZ, the party appears to remain relatively strong in the west of the district (Virovitica and Podravina Region). Its biggest weakness in Osijek lies in the fact that its county and city leaders don't live there, operating instead from Zagreb where they serve as senior government officials.

¶11. (SBU) The number of votes for the HSP (Glavas's partner both in

the city and the county) doubled between two different sets of elections in mid-2005 and late 2006. Partly this is due to the fact that HSP president Anto Djapic is also the Mayor of Osijek, where he has started a number of projects, in the style of the populist SDP Mayor of Zagreb, Milan Bandic. HSP County President Danijel Srb expects his party to win the single biggest number of votes in all of District Four, despite the HDZ's strength in the western parts. "Our strategy is that of steady growth, not coming to power at all costs," Srb said, explaining the HSP would definitely run alone in the elections and link up with others -- preferably the Croatian Peasants Party (HSS) and the HSLS -- only afterward. Srb said that Glavas's policy of regionalism would probably be short-lived in Slavonia, where people don't have strong autonomist feelings as they do, for instance, in Istria.

BRADTKE